



IMPROVING COURSE QUALITY WITH **STUDENT MANAGEMENT TEAMS**

Can students help instructors improve their teaching?

Some professors say that when students participate in collaborative quality management structures, they can be more useful than an “expert” teaching consultant.

No matter how hard professors work on their teaching skills, most could still use some assistance. Often, the best help is right in their classes—their students. After all, who has more firsthand, in-depth knowledge of a professor’s teaching effectiveness? Who has closer access to the learning concerns of individual students in the class? And who stands to gain the most from the professor’s improvement?

Students working together for the good of the class can accomplish a great deal. By meeting regularly over a sustained period of time, being committed to improvement and quality, acquiring data through classroom assessment techniques, and engaging in regular group discussion, they are apt to produce insights individuals would not likely achieve alone. According to Edward Nuhfer, director of the Office of Teaching Effectiveness at the University of Colorado, empowering students to share responsibility for a course’s success generates insightful feedback and increases student ownership and participation in the class. These are the main reasons Nuhfer and many other educators operate student management teams in their classrooms.

BY RACHEL A. SCHWARTZ

The Roots of Student Management Teams

The concept of student management teams that Edward Nuhfer outlines in *A Handbook for Student Management Teams* is based on Edward Deming's successful work with quality circles in which Deming recommended that factory executives seeking to improve quality encourage workers and their superiors to meet as equals to generate suggestions. This gave workers a new-found freedom to think, rather than just process orders, and tapped a rich vein of creativity, responsibility, and productivity.

Nuhfer and many others believe that the empowerment and the ownership status that results from quality circles works as well in the classroom as on the factory floor.

Nuhfer adds that not taking advantage of this participatory management puts schools at a vast disadvantage. "The university is behind industry," he says. "It's the last bastion of boss management."

Just What Are Student Management Teams?

Most teams consist of three to four students from the same class plus their instructor. Together, they are responsible for the success of a course. The students' special responsibility is to monitor the course through their own experience, to receive comments from other students, to work as a team with their instructor on a regular basis, and to make recommendations to the instructor about how the course can be improved.

Students meet among themselves weekly, with the professor attending these meetings every other week or so. All meetings

convene outside of both the classroom and the professor's office—in a neutral setting where team members feel they can speak freely.

According to Patricia Whiting, an education consultant and former professor of engineering at West Virginia University and the University of California at Berkeley, "If you are willing to spring for coffee and doughnuts at a spot near campus, you'll find that students will really open up about how things are going from a student perspective."

Nuhfer suggests that student management teams concentrate on one of two foci: either the professor (for example, suggesting changes in the professor's approach) or the class content (for example, evaluating the effectiveness of certain homework assignments). Once a focus has been decided upon, the group meets to develop suggestions for improvements. To keep up with their instructor's progress, Karl Smith, a civil engineering professor at the University of Minnesota, recommends letting the team pass out and tally one-minute papers that give class members a chance to voice reactions to the presentation and/or content of each day's material.

Who Should Be Student Managers?

The selection process for student managers differs from program to program. Karl Smith asks for volunteers from his classes and invites an additional few to serve. In terms of compensation, Smith says, "I offer to write better letters of recommendation (as I'll know them better), and I buy them lunch at the end of the term." It's "not much," he admits, but in civil engineering, students are "pretty conscientious and understand the importance of involvement." Once Smith establishes his groups, he makes certain each class knows its representatives by having the team members stand up before the rest of the class and introduce themselves.

In the chemistry department at the City College of New York (CCNY), the student managers are considered mentors and lead groups of six to eight students in study for two hours a week in place of recitation. "We take away a little talking at people and replace it with a student-led approach," says David Gosser, associate professor of chemistry at CCNY. All the while, groups provide what Gosser calls "a feedback loop, a continuous evaluation" of their instructor in weekly student-teacher meetings in which they go over material and its presentation and come up with strategies for the upcoming study session.

While some professors believe student management teams work best when their members are mature upperclassmen who are currently taking the course they're advising, Gosser takes a different tack: his teams are made up of freshman or sophomore students who have just completed his class. He considers taking the class good training for mentoring it and says that having participants "close to the material and close in age makes for a tight connection between group leader and group." In addition, Gosser says, choosing younger students establishes "a process for creating a leadership role, a mentoring role, soon after entering college. It's a pipeline to involvement at other levels."

CCNY pays student managers \$500 per semester, a boon to the college's largely low-income students. The school has also considered, but not acted on, awarding academic credits to student managers.

THE BASICS OF STUDENT MANAGEMENT TEAMS

A student management team is made up of three or four students from the same classroom, plus the professor. Together the members assume responsibility for the success of the course.

- Students meet weekly, while the professor attends every other week. During their time alone, the students discuss the concerns of the class regarding a particular issue or assigned task and work together to come up with some possible solutions. When the professor attends, the team voices the concerns of the class and offers its suggestions.
- Meetings convene away from the classroom and the professor's office.
- The professor keeps a log or journal of suggestions and progress.
- The goals of the team may focus on the professor or on the content.

Source: A Handbook for Student Management Teams by Edward Nuhfer (January 1995, Office of Teaching Effectiveness, University of Colorado).

“as a status report time,” Mahler says, “to discuss what was going well and what we needed to improve.” Smith joined the meetings every other week. Together the professor and his team talked about the strong aspects of the course and hashed out solutions to a variety of problems: students’ confusion with project instructions, student apathy, and absenteeism.

Participating in the student management teams, Mahler says, “enhanced my learning experience,” and the team’s presence benefited Smith and the class as a whole by giving an outlet to fellow students who, Mahler believes, would have been

“more apt to nail a teacher at evaluation time than to talk to him while the course was running.”

For Kristen Boynton, 24, student management teams are all about “bridging that gap” between teacher and student. Boynton served on a team in a graduate psychology course at the University of Colorado at Denver in which several students were disrupting the flow of the small class. The problem was solved when her professor allowed the team to meet privately with the class to field the students’ concerns. The “negative” class members spoke maturely of their problems with the

TEAM TASKS

As the student management team’s professor, it is up to you to choose one of two main foci for the group: the professor’s performance or the structure and content of the course. Once you’ve established the focus, you can assign tasks to the team.

FOCUS on the Professor

Following are possible tasks for the student management team:

- **Ask for help and feedback in a specific area.** For example: Is the pace of the class too fast or too slow?
- **Suggest that the team conduct a formative survey.** A typical summative survey, given at the close of a term, will tell if students are satisfied, but by that late date you lack the time to make changes in the course. A formative survey, completed one-third to one-half of the way through the term and asking for feedback on your style and the content of the class, empowers you to do something about your weaknesses immediately. Formative surveys have proven especially helpful for teams that can’t quite put a finger on what a professor needs help with.
- **Bring in a summary of last term’s student evaluations of you and ask the team to discuss weaknesses that were pointed out.** This discussion also gives you a chance to defend your style. For example, students may have indicated that you assign far too much reading, when in fact the volume is necessary to cover what is required for the course.
- **With your team, study a videotape of the class in session.** “This is one of the most powerful tools if done well,” Edward Nuhfer says. When used along with a formative study, you get a chance to see yourself as the class does. The team then suggests ways you can adjust your performance to better suit the class.
- **Ask the team to suggest two specific changes in your approach.** Being urged to “make changes,” is too vague and overarching to be helpful, and being bombarded by a slew of suggestions isn’t helpful either. You need to ask the team: What are two things I can do for the greatest return? Take into consideration the amount of time and effort the changes will entail.

FOCUS on the Course

You might ask your student managers to do the following:

- **Help improve organization of the course material.** “Sometimes we know the teaching material so well that we forget how we got there,” Nuhfer says. Why not let the team, at the end of the term, rewrite the syllabus? Students may help you see a new way of grouping material. For example, maybe Chapter 5 makes more sense if it’s taught before Chapter 4.
- **Help improve the clarity of the material.** For example, some teams suggest more overheads. And some teams even construct the overheads themselves, learning even more in the process.
- **Rule on the effectiveness of the course textbook.** No one has the time to read through all the sample textbooks that come across a professor’s desk. “Toss ’em to the team and ask their opinion,” Nuhfer suggests. They just might find a textbook that makes the course easier to understand.
- **Offer an opinion on time-benefit analysis of course assignments.** If yesterday’s assignment took the average student 10 hours to complete, the team may ask you, “Was this valuable enough to merit the time we spent?” The answer is either yes, and you explain why; or no, and you show the students that they went about the problem in the wrong way, or you reconsider your assignment practices.
- **Offer suggestions on how to prevent absenteeism.** Point out to the team that absenteeism slows down the class and ask the team how to deter it. If the members say, “Knock three points off the offenders’ grades,” you can announce this plan to the class without looking like you are mandating an unfair scheme. “It’s peer pressure operating at a high level in a positive way,” Nuhfer says.

Source: A Handbook for Student Management Teams by Edward Nuhfer (January 1995, Office of Teaching Effectiveness, University of Colorado).

course, Boynton says, and others offered suggestions for keeping the class fresh and new. The team members then met with their professor and presented the feedback they had gathered.

Banning the professor from the discussion was necessary, Boynton believes, because "the traditional flow of the communication in a classroom is from professor to student, and it's hard to break that pattern. Students don't feel they are on equal footing." The class was empowered, Boynton says, by meeting constructively "student to student."

How to Get Started

Interested in organizing your own student management teams? Edward Nuhfer outlines the following four implementation stages in *A Handbook for Student Management Teams*. The handbook, Nuhfer says, is currently used by more than 300 U.S. colleges and universities.

■ **Stage One: Planning.** This stage begins when you decide to improve your class. After making the commitment to stand behind a student management team, move forward and form a team.

■ **Stage Two: Trust Building.** As the first team member, it is your role to define a goal, outline an initial task, and ask for help from your new team. The delicate confidence of your fledgling group is made or broken in this stage, so stick to an easy, nonconfrontational problem like asking team members to sit in various parts of the room and report back how well they can hear you and see the board. Give feedback, recognition, and praise. After the team sees it is capable of success, it will begin to assume a more independent role.

■ **Stage Three: Getting Effective.** At this stage, it is important to take risks and encourage change. Students should begin to make their needs known by this point. As they do, listen to their concerns and respond positively.

■ **Stage Four: Reaping Long-Term Gains.** Keep a written log on the progress of the class with notes of insights and changes you've instituted along the way. Consult it when revising your syllabus for the next term. But don't let a written record keep you from making changes soon—revise your course while the ways to improve are still fresh in your mind.

But the four stages of implementation can't ensure success unless they're undertaken with the right attitude. Be certain before you begin that you want to see the process through, and make sure your team members do, too. While Nuhfer reports that 97 percent of students involved said they would participate again, he also notes that 1 to 3 percent of student management teams fail. They do so, Nuhfer says, because educators don't make the time to meet with students, don't implement their suggestions, or include members who are opposed to the success of the project.

When a professor and his or her team members conspire to succeed, student management teams benefit the course. And for those who serve on teams, the advantages continue into the real world. In a survey of local industry, David Gosser found that the most sought-after attributes were communication and team skills—the very talents student management team membership builds.

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REASONS STUDENT MANAGEMENT TEAMS FAIL

Survey results reveal these common pitfalls:

- **Lack of support from the instructor.** If you start a team and decide you don't have time to meet with its members, your team is bound to fail.
- **Poor communication.** Make sure each side is properly perceiving what the other side says. For example, if your team tells you, "We're having problems with the test," don't instantly perceive this complaint as, "The test was unfair."
- **Management pressure to "volunteer."** Don't force students to be involved. Likewise, department chairs should not mandate that you form a student management team. All participants must be enthusiastic.
- **Ritualistic participation.** If recent teams solved your major problems and you have no specific agenda this term, don't waste everyone's time by forming another team so soon.
- **Hidden student agendas.** Students sometimes have personal agendas that reflect individual prejudice and threaten classroom fairness. Be on the lookout for those with ulterior motives.
- **Domineering personalities.** Sometimes a few students talk and talk, and no one else gets a word in edgewise. It's important that each team has someone who'll step in after such offenders have spoken for a few minutes and ask for others' opinions.
- **Unheeded recommendations.** If you disregard students' suggestions, the team becomes frustrated and you appear insincere, "especially if the request is simple—'we can't read your writing on the board,' for example," Edward Nuhfer says. If you aren't willing to listen and implement, student management teams aren't for you.
- **Improper reward system.** Don't give students inappropriate compensation, such as higher grades, for serving on teams. "Grades are supposed to measure knowledge," Nuhfer points out. Instead of giving student management team participants five extra points on the final exam, buy them a pizza.

Source: *A Handbook for Student Management Teams* by Edward Nuhfer (January 1995, Office of Teaching Effectiveness, University of Colorado).